

The Forest Service Is Coming to Utah: What It Means for the State, Its Businesses, and Public Lands Management

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by Samuel Flitton

On March 31, USDA announced that the U.S. Forest Service will relocate its headquarters from Washington, D.C. to Salt Lake City, bringing roughly 260 positions and the agency's top leadership to the Intermountain West. For Utah, a state with more than 8 million acres of national forest land and a roughly \$9.7 billion outdoor recreation economy, this is a significant development.

Utah Is Already at the Table

The relocation does not arrive in a vacuum. In January 2026, Utah finalized a 20-year cooperative agreement with the Forest Service giving the state a substantially larger role in managing its national forests, covering decisions about logging, grazing, recreation, wildlife, and forest restoration. The Forest Service's Intermountain Regional Office has been based in Ogden for decades. That office will close under the reorganization, but the new national headquarters in Salt Lake City places an even higher level of decision-making authority in the state.

What the Reorganization Looks Like

The restructuring goes beyond a change of address. All nine regional offices will close, replaced by 15 state directors and six new "operational service centers" around the country. The full transition is expected to take about a year, with employee relocations beginning this summer.

Implications for Utah Businesses

Utah was the first state to create a dedicated Office of Outdoor Recreation, and companies like Cotopaxi, Backcountry, Vista Outdoor, Amer Sports, Osprey Packs, and Rossignol are headquartered or have major operations here. Outdoor recreation is a major contributing sector to the state's economy and supports around 75,000 jobs.

For businesses that depend on access to national forest land for recreation, grazing, timber, or resource extraction, having Forest Service leadership in Salt Lake City could

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mean faster engagement with the agency's top decision-makers and new contracting opportunities as the agency builds out its Utah presence. At the same time, existing Forest Service contractors should prepare for potential disruptions as contracting officers relocate and the organizational structure is redrawn.

The Public Lands Backdrop

The announcement lands in the middle of an active debate about federal land ownership in Utah. The federal government owns roughly two-thirds of all land in the state, and Senator Mike Lee has repeatedly pushed for the sale of federal public lands, most recently through an amendment to the budget reconciliation bill last summer that was ultimately withdrawn after bipartisan backlash. Some observers have raised concerns about locating the agency's headquarters in a state whose elected officials have challenged the constitutionality of federal land ownership. Others argue the move simply puts leadership closer to the land it manages. Rep. Celeste Maloy of Utah's 2nd Congressional District, who sits on the House Natural Resources Committee, welcomed the relocation, saying it could improve responsiveness on wildfire and land management.

What to Watch

Several open questions remain: whether the Forest Service will experience the same kind of workforce attrition that followed USDA's Kansas City relocation during the first Trump term; whether Congress will raise legal objections to the move; how the shift to a state-based management model will affect tribal relations; and whether Utah's expanded cooperative agreement becomes a template for other states or a flashpoint over state influence on federal land decisions.

For businesses, governments, and organizations with a stake in how Utah's public lands are managed, this reorganization is worth watching closely.